

Religion, Difference and the Promise of Liberal Political Theory

On Abeysekara's *The Politics of Postsecular Religion*

Jakob De Roover

Published in *Religion*, 42(1), 141-149

1. One of the central theses of *The Politics of Postsecular Religion* is that modern democratic politics is animated by a deferred promise – a promise that is never fulfilled and that perhaps can never be fulfilled, because we do not know what its fulfillment would entail. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's claim that 'democracy is a promise', Abeysekara explains this basic *aporia* as follows:

...[T]o live in a democracy, to be a citizen, to believe in democratic principles—freedom of choice, freedom of the press, human rights, justice, law, among others—is to live in a state of deferral. To believe in the deferred promise is to believe in the future. That is to say, by definition, that which is deferred belongs to the future. Put simply, if democracy is a promise, and if a promise is deferred, then to live in a democracy is to live in the future (1).

Abeysekara calls this the 'aporia of our democratic existence' and summarizes it, again in Derrida's words, 'even when there is democracy, it never exists', because it always 'remains to come' (2).

This 'indefinitely deferred' status of democracy, I think, goes to the heart of normative political theory. Let me try to explain the puzzle from another perspective. Normative political theory formulates models for the state and society based on sets of principles: equality, autonomy, liberty, toleration, neutrality... These principles contain the moral *ought*: in a true liberal democracy, all citizens *ought* to be equal; all *ought* to have equal rights regardless of gender, religious or ethnic affiliation; one *ought* to be free to express one's opinions and profess and

practice one's religion; etc. This moral ought is essential, because liberal political theory (in its normative form) does not just put forward heuristics for building a peaceful and stable society or formulate hypothetical imperatives of the following form: 'If one desires to create an affluent society, one should respect the equality and liberty of all citizens and tolerate their religious beliefs'. Instead, this political theory puts forward *normative* principles or unconditional imperatives that claim validity in any set of circumstances. These principles are followed, not because of their success in creating stable or affluent societies (even though this can serve as an additional justification), but because of their intrinsic moral value. Even where it is necessary to disturb the stability or decrease the affluence of society in order to pursue norms like equality, freedom and toleration, one should go ahead.

Such normative political models have a peculiar relation to the empirical world. Although one recognizes some state as a liberal democracy in case it fulfills certain basic and necessary conditions (universal adult suffrage, separation of powers, basic freedom to profess and practice one's religion...), one can always condemn any such liberal democracy for its failure to live up to one or several of the normative principles of liberal political theory. At any point, one can judge the factual empirical situation in a liberal democracy – *no matter what that factual situation is* – as deficient vis-à-vis norms like equality, freedom of expression, religious freedom and separation of church and state. One could point out that this state's educational system or taxing policy is not yet fully democratic and equal, or that the state still gives certain privileges to some church or religious denomination, or that freedom of speech is restricted in certain cases.

The trouble is that we do not know what the 'complete' fulfillment of these norms would look like. We cannot imagine what a perfectly secular and just state or a fully free, equal and tolerant society would look like. Yet, we can (and do) interpret and assess the factual situation of any particular state as deficient in relation to these norms, whose further fulfillment then has to be pursued in the future. Interestingly, Abeysekara notes that this 'deferred promise' of

democracy leads to an odd way of relating to the present: the democratic present is no longer available for criticism and improvement, because ‘thinking of the present will have to be fashioned through thinking of the deferred future’ (132). At first blush, this claim may seem false. The norms of liberal democracy precisely allow us to criticize the present state of affairs and strive for its improvement (more equality, more liberty, more democracy and more toleration). Yet, there is truth to the claim that the present is no longer really available to us, once we enter the realm of normative thinking. We can then see the factual state of affairs only as a deficiency vis-à-vis the norms of liberal democracy (or any normative model that we project). That is, we either view the factual present as the negation of our norms or approach it as a stage in the ever unfinished pursuit of those norms. The present can solely be seen as a shortcoming vis-à-vis the normative model or ‘the deferred promise’.

Abeysekara is right in saying that the present is then no longer available for real criticism. This is the case, it appears to me, because this kind of normative reasoning involves a fallacy, *the fallacy of normative disjunction*. It is as though one reduces the options for any society or political system to just two: either the normative model of one’s political theory (that of secular liberal democracy) or its negation. To give an illustration, European colonial regimes approached the societies of Asia and Africa through this mode of reasoning. They assessed them in terms of liberal norms and then characterized them as illiberal failures: most of these societies were viewed as theocracies, where inequality, corruption and tyranny ruled, where capricious despots had not yet been replaced by the rule of law, and where politics and religion were mixed. This was not an ‘othering of the other’ or not even primarily a justification of colonial rule, as contemporary critics of orientalism might suggest. Rather, it was an epistemic consequence of the normative framework that constrained the colonial reasoning on religion, state and society. This carved up the universe of political possibilities in terms of a normative disjunction: either one pursued liberal secular democracy or one ended up in theocratic and inegalitarian oppression.

Such an approach does not allow one to analyze the factual situation of some state in order to locate and understand its errors or vulnerabilities in building a stable society and to formulate potential ways of correcting these errors. Instead, one presupposes the validity of the norms of one's political theory; next, one describes the factual situation as the negation or incomplete fulfillment of those norms; and, finally, one concludes that this particular normative model now has to be implemented. This appears to involve a vicious circle: once one has accepted the normative model and its set of norms, the only possible way to make sense of the factual situation is as a deficiency vis-à-vis these norms and then the only route towards improvement is a further implementation of these norms.

2. Even though I share Abeysekara's skepticism towards genealogy as an intellectual enterprise, a brief foray into the historical emergence of the European culture and its political thought helps us gain insight into the nature of the *aporia* he sketches. Studying the historical development of western Christianity, one inevitably confronts its notion of divine providence. The Christian religion claims that the world – everything that was, is and will be – embodies the will of the Creator, the biblical God. His will produces the world (see Balagangadhara 1994).

Since this God is perfect, the world produced by His will must also be perfect: it must be the best of all possible worlds. In this sense, S.N. Balagangadhara and I have argued, the factual and the normative – the 'is' and the 'ought' – are united in the will of God. However, it is impossible for us human beings to comprehend this unity, because, in our limited understanding, the factual and the normative always fall apart. On our own, as human beings, we can never fully understand either the Sovereign or His will, because we cannot make sense of the unity between the 'is' and the 'ought'. At the same time, Christianity has also professed that God's will operates in human history and that, to understand historical events, one has to decipher what God intends for human beings (De Roover and Balagangadhara 2009).

How is this Christian theology relevant to Abeysekara's aporia of democratic existence? Looking at the history of Europe, from the early middle Ages, certain institutions – first the monastery, later the Church and, much later, the nation-state – were seen as the embodiments of God's will. This implied that these institutions had to exemplify the unity of the factual and the normative. However, human beings inevitably failed in expressing this unity. They noted the disjunction between the 'ought' and the 'is' in the monastery or the church: corruption and injustice prevailed; monastic codes and canon laws were violated again and again. From the human point of view, the factual and the normative always fell apart in these institutions: the factual became testaments of human sins; the normative took the form of ideals that one had to live up to. This situation led to new attempts to realize the unity of fact and norm. Hence, first the monasteries and later the church were continuously reformed according to ever stricter rules and laws.

The history of medieval and early modern western Christendom exemplified this dynamic. Embodying the will of God, certain institutions are supposed to unite the factual and the normative; yet, human attempts to realize this unity could not but fail to do so. In the subsequent phase, this failure generated new attempts, which failed yet again, and so on. In Christian Europe, the strong sense of the unfolding of God's will in human history generated a specific attitude towards society and its development. The existing social institutions were never what they ought to be. Hence the widespread tendency in the western societies to reform the church or society according to a normative image, which specified this divine purpose.

What Abeysekara calls 'the aporia of our democratic existence', I would like to suggest, is the legacy of this normative stance towards society. As he insists, it truly is an *aporia*, because of two reasons: on the one hand, it can never be bypassed, dissolved or penetrated, because the attempt to realize the unity between fact and norm is bound to fail and, yet, bound to be eternally repeated.

On the other hand, secular democracy as a ‘deferred promise’ makes even less sense than the Christian pursuit to unite fact and norm, because it has lost the powerful theological motor of attempting to realize the embodiment of God’s will in human institutions. The religious framework that made this into a sensible project, in spite of its unattainable nature, has now disappeared into the background. Yet, normative liberal theory continues to strive for the same kind of impossibility. Implicitly, it aims for a perspective that is not accessible to humanity: the impartiality of God, who is the only one to know the elusive point where the ‘is’ and ‘ought’ meet (namely, His will). The attempt of liberal political theory is to remove political authority from the inevitable partiality of human hands and transfer it to the perfectly impartial rule of law, to create ‘a government of law and not of men’.

3. At different stages of his argument, Abeysekara develops a powerful criticism of the current crop of postcolonial studies. His focus is the fashionable claim that one ought not to ‘essentialize’ identities.

To begin with, let us take a strand from Abeysekara’s interesting analysis of a debate between two Sri Lankan scholars on Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost*. In 2000, Qadri Ismail denounced Ondaatje’s novel as an attempt to deny the political nature of the Sri Lankan conflict and to invoke a Sinhala past characterized by its Buddhist humanism. As such, Abeysekara remarks, Ondaatje’s depiction of the past becomes ‘nothing but a partner in Sinhala Buddhist domination’ (61). Radhika Coomaraswamy, in contrast, defended Ondaatje’s celebration of non-dominant forms of Buddhist humanism as a positive force that can help fight the hegemonic Buddhist nationalism of the Sri Lankan government.

This reflects the problem we noted earlier. To grant that positive forces are available in Sri Lankan Buddhist traditions, one has to make these into ‘Buddhist humanism’ – a local, slightly embryonic variant of western liberal humanism. That is, one keeps moving between two poles in making sense of these traditions: either they are negations of the norms of liberal humanism (and

thus forms of hierarchy and domination) or they are less developed and localized confirmations of the same set of norms. This interpretive tradition knows a long history. Buddhism was often interpreted by European scholars as a variant of the Protestant Reformation, which shared its values of equality and spiritual liberty and challenged the 'papism' of the Hindu priesthood and caste hierarchy. Today, this continues, but now the 'positive forces' within Buddhism have become stunted variants of western liberal humanism.

As Abeysekara indicates, the hold of such conceptual constraints becomes clear when Ismail intends to provide an alternative to the humanism that fosters hierarchy and domination (65). Ismail calls for imagining a new kind of 'proximity' between self and other in the present. He draws on Levinas to explain this proximity that does not lead to the 'absorption or disappearance of alterity': it is "the fraternal way of proximity to the other," with the other being understood as a 'neighbor': literally, someone who is not distant or radically different but who is proximate or close by, who lives next door' (Ismail 2005, 237). This is the old principle of Christian charity. It hinges on the deep-seated belief that to get along peacefully with others, these others *must* somehow be close to our selves. Such an approach to the problem of co-existence is shared by Christian and secular humanism: there must be proximity, because distance is inherently bad.

A similar theme returns when Abeysekara takes some of the postcolonial literature to task for its assumption 'that the problem [of identity] can be managed, if not solved, by pointing to differences that shape identity; hence the pervasive and tireless emphasis on the importance of not essentializing identity these days' (99). Thus, the postcolonial literature 'just assumes that the problem can be solved, or kept at bay, so long as it can speak of the nonhomogeneous, fluid nature of identity' (99). Abeysekara insinuates that this fixation on pointing out the internal differentiation or heterogeneity within 'identities' in fact amounts to an attempt to deny difference: 'one may be the same yet different'.

Indeed, there are several difficulties in this postmodern obsession with heterogeneity. The first is epistemological: for any unity or continuity one describes in the world and to which one attributes certain common properties, one can always point out a discontinuity at a lower level of description. When one talks of the species *Homo sapiens* in evolutionary biology, it is child's play to point out that there is a great deal of heterogeneity within this class. One can do the same for any subdivision of the human species or any human group. But this type of infinite regress is not helpful, since one's emphasis on continuity or discontinuity depends on the level of abstraction at which one's description is pitched and the problems which one's theory aims to address.

The second difficulty is that this postmodern recognition of difference continues to efface difference. Since all identities are fluid and heterogeneous, one cannot really distinguish between different peoples and traditions. We are all part of *one* internally differentiated humanity, which cannot and ought not to be carved up into different peoples, groups, traditions or cultures. This is another avatar of the type of humanism that we have inherited from fifteen centuries of Christianity. From this perspective, it is unacceptable to emphasize the differences *between* groups or traditions, since instead one ought only to focus on internal differences *within* groups and traditions and thus dissolve differences *between* them.

Masquerading as a genuine and deep recognition of difference, this latest avatar of Christian humanism reproduces the disposition that negates difference and makes difference *between* peoples into a troubling, essentially negative aspect of human existence. By saying that we are all different, one is implying that we are all made the same. One does so by suggesting that we are all different in the same or similar ways: the differences of importance are not those that make different peoples different in different ways, but those differences that reveal inequalities, oppression, domination and power relations. This is to insist on difference while retaining sameness, as Abeysekara remarks (105).

4. However, let there be no doubt that the dominant ways of characterizing the differences *between* cultures, groups or traditions are problematic. While analyzing a paragraph from the work of the anthropologist Michele Gamburd, Abeysekara points out this deeply problematic nature. He shows how her explanation of the violence in Sri Lanka construes it as a conflict between two cultural-religious identities and groups:

Violence is the product of the conflict between the minority and the majority. Sinhala-Buddhists are the majority; Tamil-Hindus and Muslims the minority...Put differently, a certain kind of transparent Sinhala-Buddhistness and Tamil-Hinduness, it is assumed, defines a priori the demarcation between majority and minority. The majority and minority are opposed to each other in terms of language, religion, or ethnicity, and these things form the essence of difference between them. This essential difference between Sinhalas and Tamils, punctuated by particular insurgencies, has “torn the fabric of national unity” (171).

Abeysekara then pertinently remarks: ‘What emerges from this story is the significance of “unity” to the democratic, peaceful existence of a postcolonial nation. The achievement of this unity, however, remains virtually impossible, since the supposedly essential religious, ethnic, and linguistic differences between the majority and the minority always tend to stand in the way’ (171). He relates this obsession with the unity of the nation-state to a more general western Enlightenment problematic of seeing all such differences as the cause of disunity within nations and war between nations. To illustrate this problematic, he turns to Kant’s essay ‘To Perpetual Peace’ and its claim that ‘the desire of every nation (or its ruler) is to establish an enduring peace, hoping, if possible, to dominate the entire world. But nature *wills* otherwise. She uses two means to prevent people from intermingling and to separate them, differences in *religion* and *language*, which do indeed dispose men to mutual hatred and pretexts for war’ (Kant 1983, 125).

Abeysekara makes the crucial point that this judgment is based on Kant’s understanding that

‘there is only a single *religion*, valid for all men in all times’. Different religions and books ‘can thus be nothing more than accidental vehicles of religion and only thereby be different in different times and places’ (Kant 1983, 125).

In such passages, we note where the intuition comes from that fundamental differences between people are intrinsically reprehensible. Humanity ought to be united by one single religion, but is instead divided by several manifestations of religion. Indeed, as Abeysekara suggests, it is only from this perspective that ‘the solution to this problem would be for the *majority* to cultivate tolerance toward the *minority* differences’ (172). The notion of tolerance presupposes this particular experience of difference, where difference is problematic because it divides people and prevents the unity of society or the nation-state.

From this perspective, we need greater agreement regarding principles, before we can even hope to establish peace. A desired state is imagined where humanity would exist in unity and harmony without any such differences. The existence of religious, cultural and linguistic differences is experienced as a shortcoming vis-à-vis this desired state. This desired state looks very much like the condition of humanity as it is described in the Bible before the tower of Babel: ‘And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech’ [Genesis 11:1]. Perpetual peace can exist only if we return to the united humanity speaking a single language and sharing the pure principles of the law of God engraved in their hearts.

To grasp this contrast between the particular and the universal in religion, we can turn to Balagangadhara’s theory of the double dynamic of universalization that is intrinsic to religion (Balagangadhara 1994). According to this theory, a religion like Christianity expands in two ways, as a consequence of its unconditional and universal truth claims: not only through proselytization, whereby groups of people are converted to its specific doctrines and practices, but also through a moment of secularization, whereby it achieves as formal a level as possible by progressively losing its specific form. A kind of dialectic comes into being between the two

moments of proselytization and secularization. While any form of Christian religion is compelled to retain its specific form and spread its specific account, each will also exhibit the tendency to de-Christianize itself and assume an increasingly minimal, simple and more variable form, so as to become *the* universal religion.

Thus, when Abeysekara stresses ‘that the public space of agreement and unity that this Kantian rhetoric labors to secure is one that is transparently “secular”’ (174), he is right, I would propose, but only insofar as the secular is the sphere of de-Christianized Christian religion. This ‘secular’ sphere is opposed to another sphere, ruled by specific differences between religious groups, which inevitably cause divisiveness. One imagines a general religion to be accepted by all of humanity, which should rule the public sphere, as opposed to the ‘negative dogmas’ (to borrow Rousseau’s term) that amount to intolerance. On the one hand, there is a space of common ground and generic principles shared by all citizens; on the other hand, a space of specific doctrines that stand in inevitable rivalry.

This way of imagining human social existence entails a particular model for understanding conflicts and tensions in society. For instance, Abeysekara shows how an LTTE attack on the Sri Lankan national airport on July 23, 2001 was systematically linked by commentators to the riots on July 23, 1983, where Sinhalese mobs killed Tamil civilians, even though the two events were very dissimilar: ‘Seen in this way, an attack on the state (e.g., the airport and the military base) becomes (for the journalists and perhaps for the LTTE as well) an extension of the conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority’ (220). This happens, because the liberal secular nation-state comes with an inbuilt conception of pluralism and conflict in society: societies are divided into different groups, whose religions/beliefs stand in a relation of rivalry to each other.

This brings us back to the liberal secular nation-state as a normative model that is never fully realized, but always ‘a promise’, so to speak. Originally, this model emerged as a solution to

the predicament of early modern Europe. Societies were divided into different confessional communities, each of which claimed to be the only true religion and made absolute truth claims for a set of doctrines and church laws. If the state had a privileged relationship with any of these Christian confessions, it would choose sides in the conflict of truth claims and end up imposing the beliefs of one confession and its followers and discriminating against, or even persecuting, the believers of another. Therefore, the state ought always to be secular and religiously neutral.

What has happened in the normative theories of the liberal secular state is a universal projection of this problem of Christian Europe as though it is a common human predicament: different religious/ethnic groups in society hold different sets of beliefs to be true and, therefore, the state should be neutral or equidistant towards the truth claims of all such belief systems. The model of the secular state comes with its own inbuilt conception of what a plural society looks like—a conception that does not result from analysis of such plural societies but precedes any such analysis.

In fact, this model plays an insidious role: when implemented, it begins to *generate* the predicament to which its own normative model is the ultimate solution. Like India, Sri Lanka is a striking case in point: along with the emergence of the secular nation-state, the existing tensions between Sinhalas and Tamils took the form of a clash between two competing ethnic/religious communities and, next, an additional division developed between Tamil Hindus and Tamil-speaking Muslims as two distinct religious communities. Along with the model of the liberal nation-state comes a conceptual straitjacket for the perception of differences between groups in society. It concerns a model to make sense of tensions and conflicts, which re-configures these conflicts as the negations of liberal norms and then presents the normative model of the liberal secular state as *the* one way to cope with the conflicts.

5. This leaves many important issues from Abeysekara's pages untouched: his critical analysis of Foucauldian genealogy as an intellectual enterprise; his comments on the Gandhian collapsing of

the public/private distinction; his incisive remarks on the harmfulness of historical consciousness and the necessity of active forgetfulness to human flourishing... However, it also leaves out the lists of questions and sentences, whose precise meaning and implications remain unclear. In this respect, the very project of postcolonial studies faces a tragedy: vital questions are being lost to particular fashions that happen to dominate the American humanities. Ultimately, one finishes the book hoping that Abeysekara will allow his critique of postcolonial studies to recover his valuable insights from the postmodern penchant for opacity.

References

Balagangadhara, S.N. 1994. *'The Heathen in His Blindness...': Asia, the West and the dynamic of religion*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

De Roover, J. and S.N. Balagangadhara. 2009. 'Liberty, tyranny and the will of God: the principle of toleration in early modern Europe and colonial India'. *History of Political Thought* 30(1), 111-139.

Ismail, Q. 2005. *Abiding by Sri Lanka: on peace, place and postcoloniality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kant, I. 1983. 'To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch' (1795) in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays: on politics, history, and morals*, ed. Ted Humphrey. Indianapolis: Hackett.